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ABSTRACT

The field of experiential education can be enhanced through the use of meditation. The vision statement of the Association for Experiential Education includes the aim of creating a just and compassionate world. This goal can be approached one person at a time by encouraging each individual in the field to become a just and compassionate person. Such a person must have the skills to cultivate peace of mind--skills provided through the ancient tool of meditation. Meditation may be defined as the effort to pay attention, intentionally and nonjudgmentally, to the experience of the present moment and to sustain this attention over time. One form of meditation, mindfulness meditation, has no religious or ideological connotations and has the primary goal of bringing understanding into one's own thoughts and actions through a calm and focused mind. Formal and informal techniques of mindfulness meditation are briefly described. Meditation has clear health benefits related to stress reduction and has been recommended as an adjunct to or substitute for psychotherapy. Recently, meditation has been integrated into experiential education in the classroom and field. Meditation practice has increased student engagement and decreased boredom, thereby optimizing arousal and information acquisition, and has expanded students' self-awareness. (SV)

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Bringing Meditation to Experiential Education

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CHASING THE BUDDHA:

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Will White MSW, LCSW, LADC

In Western society we tend to be on the "go" with little time for reflection on our actions. This fast paced lifestyle is increasing stress-related problems on individuals and families in our society. This way of life is also partially to blame for destruction of the ecosystem and economic exploitation. One way to slow this fast paced society down is by increasing our awareness of thoughts and actions through the ancient tool of meditation. The intention of this article is to discuss meditation, its relevance to experiential educators, and current applications in the field.

The Association for Experiential Education's vision statement is:

> *"To be a leading international organization for the development of experiential education principles and methodologies. Our intent is to create a just and compassionate world by transforming education and promoting positive social change."*

In order for AEE to achieve its vision it can start one person at a time by encouraging each individual in the field to become a just and compassionate person. To help create a more compassionate world one must first have the skills to have peace of mind. Individuals can become just, calm and compassionate through the ancient tool of meditation. One of the oldest forms of meditation comes from the teachings of the Buddha over 2,500 years ago (Goldstein, Kornfield, 1987).

To personalize this subject for a moment, I have traveled all over the world in pursuit of experiences that would help me to be a better person. Cultivating peace and compassion was easy to do when living as a Buddhist monk in a monastery in Thailand. My greatest challenge has been to continue to cultivate my mind to be compassionate and peaceful while living in the Western society for in this society we are constantly bombarded by messages of competition and consumption via the media and economic system. In experiential education I have found many people interested in creating a more just world which led me to this field. Peace and compassion start in ones mind. Peace and compassion start at home and in the classroom.

Thich Nhat Hanh (Vietnamese Buddhist monk nominated for the Noble Peace Prize by Martin Luther King, Jr.) in his book "*Peace is Every Step*" wrote,

> *"With clarity, determination, and patience-the fruits of meditation-we can sustain a life of action and be real instruments of peace".* (p.99)

It is clear that AEE and Thich Nhat Hanh are intent on cultivating peace and compassion in the world. A useful tool for peace activists and experiential educators is meditation.

Experiential education is defined by the AEE in part as a "process through which a learner constructs knowledge, skill and value from direct experience" (AEE Handbook, 1997). Meditation can be defined as the effort to intentionally pay attention, nonjudgmentally, to present-moment experience and sustain this attention over time (Kabat-Zinn, 1991). One of the outcomes of meditation practice is enhanced awareness and focus by practitioners (Goldstein and Kornfield, 1987). By integrating meditation into experiential education programs students may be better able to absorb and retain what they are learning.

There are many varieties of meditations. For the purpose of this paper, and to be inclusive of all religious beliefs, the meditation discussed in this paper will be without the religious or ideological connotations. This type of meditation is mindfulness meditation. The primary goal of mindfulness meditation is to bring understanding into one own actions and thoughts by developing a calm and focused mind (Kabat-Zinn, 1991).

Mindfulness meditation is the practice of attending to the wide range of changing objects of attention while maintaining moment to moment awareness (Goldstien, Kornfield, 1987). The formal technique is usually focused on one's own breath, the rising and falling of one's abdomen or the feeling of air through the nostrils. A period of time of 20 minutes to one hour per day is helpful for a beginner. It is practiced sitting, in an upright manner, legs crossed, eyes slightly open or completely closed and back straight. The practice is to be aware of noise, thoughts or distractions, while focusing on one's breathing. The practitioner continues to follow the breath while observing distractions that come in and out of the mind. The challenge is continually bringing one's mind back to the direct experience of the breath by not following thoughts.

Meditation can be informally practiced in a variety of settings as diverse as driving a car or eating. The informal practice simply involves taking several deep breaths when feeling overexcited or agitated. This action slows thoughts down by focusing on the constant flow of the breath. Eating meditation is as simple as eating without talking and focusing on the taste and texture of the food. It is to fully experience the food without distracting talk or rushing through the meal. Meditation is simply attending to one activity and focusing on all the aspects of that one activity.

Meditation may sound like an easily accomplished task, but it requires dedication and commitment in order to maximize one's awareness of thoughts, feelings, and attachments while keeping focused on the breath. It is beneficial to learn meditation from a skilled teacher in order to learn proper techniques.

In the last ten years there have been a number of articles and books written on meditation as an effective treatment of stress related disorders such as chronic pain, anxiety disorders, and high blood pressure (Benson, 1985; Kabat-Zinn, 1991). Meditation is being recommended as an adjunct to psychotherapy and as a substitute for psychotherapy (Epstein, 1995). Meditation is clearly a health benefit

that allows people to reflect on their thinking before it increases stress (Benson,1985; Kabat-Zinn, 1991).

A review of literature in the experiential education field reveals a promising number of articles on the specific use of meditation in the classroom or the field. Most recently, Trunnell, White, Cederquist, and Braza (1996) studied the usefulness of meditation in learning activities. They studied two groups of students, one group was taught mindfulness meditation and the other was not. The two groups did identical classroom and field activities including weekly overnights. They concluded that students who meditated felt "less bored and more engaged" than the control group. The study further concluded that by decreasing boredom, one "optimizes arousal and information acquisition." Meditation does this by increasing focus, according to the study. The use of meditation in experiential education should continue to be studied, as it appears to enhance the skills of students and practitioners.

Currently at Summit Achievement, a therapeutic adventure program based in Stow, Maine, the use of meditation is being integrated into the experiential education. Students and staff are educated on a variety of meditation techniques. Every day of the program there is an hour of silence for meditation. During the expedition phase of the program, students hike in silence for the first hour of each day. Students learn to use mindfulness meditation when eating and walking, and during times of conflict. By the time a student reaches the retreat phase (three days when students are on their solo) they have experienced a variety of forms of meditation and practiced it daily.

In a recent debrief from retreat one student, who had a history of violence remarked, "meditation helped me from having my mind run amuck as it has in the past. I had times when angry on retreat so I meditated. Instead of busting things up I meditated on my anger and saw that it was really fear of being alone when I saw it was my fear making me angry I was no longer angry but sad."

Conclusions

The field of experiential education can be enhanced through the use of meditation. It has been shown as a useful tool to help students absorb information and increase awareness of thoughts and actions. Perhaps, more importantly, it may help practitioners of experiential education to become more just and compassionate people. The continued use of meditation in the field of experiential education should be encouraged, supported and studied.

"Real strength is not in power, money, or weapons, but in deep, inner peace."

— Thich Nhat Hanh

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